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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND FOREIGN RELATION COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN
DISCUSS PARLIAMENTARY TIES, HUMAN RIGHTS

Reftels: A) 03 Hanoi 3187; B) Hanoi 2590; C) State 219822

1. (U) Summary: National Assembly Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Vu Mao told the Ambassador that he wants improved relations between the National Assembly (NA) and U.S. Congress and hopes to arrange an official visit to Washington by NA Chairman Nguyen Van An. The Foreign Relations Committee still hopes to place a staff member in the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington to work on bilateral parliamentary relations. Chairman Mao also confirmed that the GVN has set up an inter-agency "steering committee" to handle international allegations on human rights issues. During the meeting, but unrelated to it, a small protest of land issues by farmers took place outside the NA office building. End Summary

2. (U) Receiving the Ambassador for a courtesy call on October 20, Chairman Vu Mao reminisced fondly of his October 2000 visit to Washington and said he had "warm feelings" towards the United States. While acknowledging that relations with Congress are a major issue for his committee, he admitted that he has largely delegated this to Committee Vice-Chairwoman Madam Ton Nu Thi Ninh to take advantage of her excellent English skills. Chairman Mao described Congress' knowledge of Vietnam as "very limited," and said he will encourage visits to Vietnam by members of Congress, adding that this invitation is open equally to "those who have goodwill toward Vietnam, and those who do not have goodwill." Mao told the Ambassador that he had "criticized" Vietnamese Ambassador to Washington Nguyen Tam Chien for spending "insufficient time on Congressional relations," and acknowledged that the Foreign Relations Committee is still seeking to place a representative in Vietnam's Washington Embassy (Ref A), hopefully during his term, which ends in two years. Mao also hopes to arrange a visit to Washington for NA Chairman Nguyen Van An in 2005 or 2006. While he would prefer to receive a formal invitation from Congress for such a visit, the NA could undertake the trip without one, Mao declared.

3. (U) The Ambassador agreed that placing a NA representative in the Embassy in Washington would be a good idea, and said that maintaining good relations with Congress is, in his view, one of the most important tasks that the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington has. He encouraged Chairman Mao to be proactive in reaching out to Congress and suggested that the Foreign Relations Committee encourage a visit to Vietnam by the newly formed Congressional Vietnam Caucus. The Ambassador added that, despite Senator Frist's and Speaker Hastert's inability to participate, Members of Congress are likely to attend the Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum, scheduled to take place in Vietnam in January (Refs B and C).

4. (U) In response to the Ambassador's inquiry, Chairman Mao confirmed that the GVN had established the "Steering Committee on Human Rights Issues" (SCHRI), which was chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan and included representatives from different ministries and the National Assembly. Madam Ninh serves as the NA's representative on the committee. The SCHRI advises the Party and Government on human rights issues; determines whether Vietnam's policies and principles regarding human rights are being upheld in reality; and collects ideas and criticisms from abroad either to correct the "shortcomings" in the Vietnamese system that they identify, or to refute the foreign claims if they are inaccurate. (Note: This committee was apparently set up after NA complaints that actions by other GVN ministries, especially the Ministry of Public Security, were damaging efforts to improve Vietnam's human rights image abroad. Ref A. End note.)

5. (U) During the Ambassador's visit, a small demonstration of farmers upset about land rights took place outside the National Assembly building. The demonstration, apparently coincidental, was entirely peaceful, and consisted largely of rural families sitting on the sidewalk across from the parliamentary offices and a small number of policemen, watching but leaving them undisturbed. (Note:

Demonstrations such as these are illegal and still relatively rare in Vietnam. End note.)

16. (U) Comment: The establishment of an inter-agency group within the GVN to address human rights issues is welcome news. It likely exists more to address Vietnam's image abroad rather than the substance of human right issues domestically, but any measure that forces some of Vietnam's more conservative-minded ministries to factor in human rights must be considered a positive, albeit small, step in the right direction. End Comment.
MARINE